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POP RECORDS

PLIMSOULS: L.A.'S SAVIOR?

BY RICHARD CROMELIN

"THE PLIMSOULS." The Plimsouls. Planet P-13.

As the leading mainstream band on the Los Angeles rock circuit, the Plimsouls are being counted on by many to restore the good name of L.A. rock. Their debut album must atone artistically for the universally reviled Knack, and compensate commercially for the dozens of failed contenders.

That's more of a burden than any group deserves. And, as the city's savior, "The Plimsouls" comes up short. Missing is the sustained intensity that's made the band's torrid live shows so satisfying.

The Plimsouls don't pretend to be trailblazers. Their bracing, no-frills music draws on classic rock elements, from the drive and snap of soul and R&B to the effervescence of '60s pop in the melodies and ringing instrumental hooks.

Head Plimsoul Peter Case—whose painfully raw, intense vocals recall some of John Lennon's early, gutty workouts—is similarly loyal to fundamental rock attitudes, sketching a tough-but-vulnerable character, a misunderstood outsider who doesn't like being told what to do.

Through most of Side 1, this shapes up as an intriguing, exciting stretch of music, particularly in the Plimsoul staple "Zero Hour," whose opening places your head smack in the middle of the drum kit. But the band closes the side with the Easybeats' "Women," a mundane bit of filler, and the LP never seems to quite recover from the sudden letdown.

They spend most of Side 2 trying to regain their footing, bottoming out in an uninspiring cover of Wilson Pickett's "Mini-Skirt Minnie" before coming back strong with the piledriver, Eddie Cochran-like riff and the eloquent distillation of workingman's malaise of "Everyday Things."

Despite its unevenness, "The Plimsouls" does reaffirm that L.A. can produce rock that's urgent and passionate. Even if it doesn't set the charts on fire, it might do good by attracting a crowd to the Plimsouls' live shows. That's where the group really shines. □

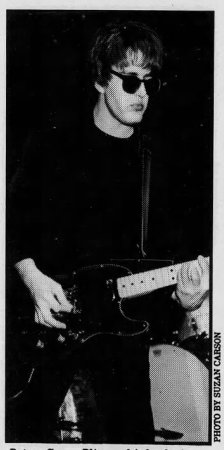

PHOTO BY SUZAN CARSON

Peter Case, Plimsouls' lead singer.

MARVIN GAYE INVOKES HEAVEN, DISCOVERS HELL

BY MIKAL GILMORE

"IN OUR LIFETIME." Marvin Gaye. Tamla T8-374 M1.

Marvin Gaye's 1971 masterwork "What's Going On" was the album that modernized Motown and helped expand the stylistic and thematic possibilities of black popular music. Since then, miraculous things have been expected of this enormously gifted, often troubled soul singer. Unfortunately, the albums that followed have seemed increasingly indifferent, until by the time of "Here, My Dear"—a sprawling, sometimes affecting, sometimes mean-minded screed on marriage, divorce and alimony—Gaye sounded depleted beyond belief.

Whether he now feels renewed is hard to say—he seldom performs and remains, as always, notoriously elusive. But his first album in almost three years, "In Our Lifetime," is closer to the mood of "What's Going On" than anything else he's done. It's another elegant set of reflections on a world verging on chaos—except this time the stakes aren't so much social as spiritual.

If that sounds suspiciously religious, it's only fair. In the aftermath of a period of personal anguish and artistic uncertainty, Marvin Gaye has sought the solace of God. What makes his testimony so inspirational—instead of merely rhetorical, like Dylan's—is that in invoking heaven, Gaye has also discovered hell, and he's not quite sure in which direction his real destiny lies.

In the album's loveliest and most thoughtful song, "Life Is for Learning," Gaye specifies the contradictions facing him, and with each successive couplet you can feel his risk—the knowledge that the crushing weight of eternity hangs in a delicate balance—increase like a no-limit pot in a fateful poker hand:

"There are songs from lust/And there are songs from pain/Some songs were done by chosen men/Some from men insane . . . Hey did you know that some songs can corrupt your flesh to dust? . . . The artist pays the price/So you don't have to pay."

Musically, "In Our Lifetime" is far less provocative. While most of the arrangements recall the modal, multilayered texture of "What's Going On," the rhythm tracks seem too often perfunctory and the orchestration itself too cluttered.

But the moments that are good are mesmerizing. Tracks like "Far Cry," "Love Me Now or Love Me Later" and "Heavy Love Affair" (all from the second side) make imaginative use of rhythm and harmony, juxtaposing staggered, abstract drum patterns alongside taut, funky guitar grooves, while also constructing intricate webworks of horns, chimes, strings and chorales to embellish Gaye's sensual, satiny vocals.

Marvin Gaye might never again make the great music so many of us hope for, and with albums like "In Our Lifetime," he might not need to. Even as a part-time artist, he's still one of the most probing, resourceful figures popular music has ever produced. □

Marvin Gaye's LP offers another set of reflections on a world verging on chaos.

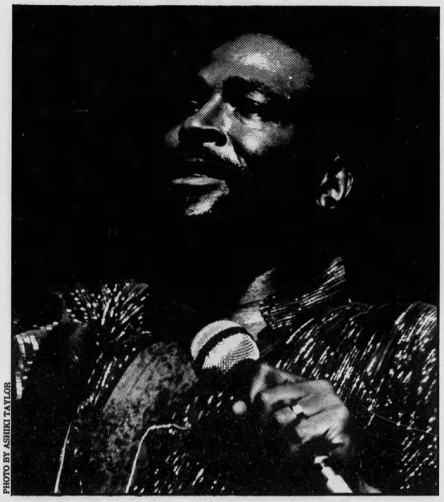

PHOTO BY ASHIK TAYLOR

PUNK PIC'S WILD SOUND

BY KRISTINE McKENNA

"THE DECLINE . . . (OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION)." Sound track. Slash SR-105.

The sound track from Penelope Spheeris' excellent film is that rare thing—a film score that is more than an afterthought tacked on to generate product. Punk music, as a personality in and of itself, is the real star of this movie. Both film and score have the air of historical artifact, at least partially due to the fact that three of the seven L.A. bands featured here are now defunct. Such developments are to be expected in light of the rapid evolution of the underground music scene, but this sense of history saps none of "The Decline's" vitality.

Catholic Discipline, the short-lived band fronted by Claude Bessy (guiding light behind Slash magazine), is captured in one of its rare live appearances, as is the recently deceased Darby Crash, whose infamous band, the Germs, provided the blueprint for numerous punk terrorist bands, including Black Flag and the Circle Jerks, both of whom are included here. We share a wonderfully entertaining evening at home with X, which also performs three songs. Also featured: Fear and the Alice Bag Band.

Live recordings usually tend to sound a bit raggedy, and the music here is unabashedly wild and messy, but besides being the essence of what this music is about, that unfinished quality allows the music to flow smoothly into the bits of dialogue included from the documentary, much of which is extremely funny. Buy the record and see the film—"The Decline" is the most intelligent and entertaining treatment of punk captured on celluloid—and vinyl—thus far. □

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